

## The Experience of At-Risk Male High School Students Participating in Academic Focused School Counseling Sessions

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*This research study used qualitative phenomenological case study methodology to investigate high school male students' experiences participating in weekly academic counseling sessions with a school counselor. Participants included 11 at-risk male students failing 9th and 10th grade who attended six individual school counseling sessions in which the school counselor utilized strategies to improve the students' academic performance. Four themes emerged to describe the students' experience participating in school counseling sessions: (a) changed perception of counseling, (b) gained academic information, (c) increased confidence, and (d) prompted change in behaviors. Implications for school counselors work with at-risk students are discussed.*

*Keywords:* school counseling, academic performance, at-risk male students

High school failure is an immediate and long-term problem with many adverse personal, social, and economic consequences (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin & Palma, 2009). In comparison to high school graduates, students who do not graduate high school have a higher risk of unemployment, incarceration, decreased overall lifetime earnings, and lower life expectancy (Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013). Students who discontinue high school were found to have less job satisfaction, increased substance use, lack of political or social activities, alienation from society, (McCaul, Donaldson, Coladarci, & Davis, 1992), lower income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005), poorer physical

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health (U.S. Department of Education, 2004), and higher unemployment rates (U.S. Department of Labor, 2005). Given the importance of helping students graduate from high school and the potential impact of school counselors on that academic process, it is important to investigate the perspectives of at-risk students who participate in school counseling. This research study addresses a gap in the literature to understand the experience of at-risk male students who participate in academic focused counseling sessions with a school counselor.

One of the greatest predictors that students will drop out of high school is their low academic performance (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Students, teachers, and parents reported that a student's lack of homework completion was the most significant reason for failing classes (Dimmit, 2003). Other characteristics of students who are at risk for dropping out include: multiple failures in classes (Allensworth & Easton, 2007); low involvement of family (Christle, Jolivet, & Nelson, 2007); disinterest in high school, lack of parental involvement, less connection to school personnel (Azzam, 2007); lack of study skills (Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch, 2006); parents or peers encouraging students to drop out; single parent family (Terry, 2008); low self-esteem (Edmondson & White, 1998); low social standing, alienation from school; less satisfaction with educational process; and lack of career plans (Kaufman, Bradbury, & Owings, 1992). In a national study to gather the perspectives of 467 high school students who had dropped out, Bridgeland, DiLulio, and Burke Morison (2006) found that 69% of the participants reported that they did not feel motivated or inspired to work hard in school. In order to reduce the high school dropout rate, the participants believed that there needs to be different schools for different students, greater parent engagement, individualized graduation plans, early warning systems to identify at-risk students, and professionals who are dedicated to providing intensive assistance strategies (i.e., school counselors). School counselors are uniquely trained to provide the interventions and advocate for the school system change recommended by the participants.

Students who are self-determined experience an internal motivation for studying, while unmotivated students believe they cannot change their academic outcomes and are more likely to discontinue their academic related activities (Alvernini & Lucidi, 2011). School counselors play an important role in motivating students. While school counselors might not possess the knowledge to serve as subject-specific academic tutors, they have been trained with the counseling knowledge and skills to address some of the social/emotional issues (e.g., alienation from school, less connection to school personnel, low satisfaction with the educational process), as well as provide basic academic information (e.g., study skills, career plans) to help reduce the risk of students dropping out of high school.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2012) National Model states that school counselors should focus on maximizing student academic achievement. In high achieving schools, school counselors deliver interventions that are consistent with the principles identified in ASCA National Standards (Fitch & Marshall, 2004). It is clear that school counselors are integral components of the academic mission of the high school. The ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2010) states that the

school counselor is concerned with the academic development of every student (Standard A.1.b). Similarly, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) 2016 Standards emphasize the importance of school counseling students being trained to provide interventions that promote the academic development of all students.

A number of school counseling interventions have been used to promote academic success including: individual academic counseling interventions (Cook & Kaffenberger, 2003), frequent meetings to review learning contracts (Reeves, 2006), Student Success Skills (SSS) group (Brigman, Webb, & Campbell, 2007), study skills group (Edmondson & White, 1998), peer-led groups (Tobias & Myrick, 1999), parental involvement (Keith & Lichtman, 1994); elementary small group counseling (Steen & Kaffenberger, 2007), classroom guidance (Brigman et al., 2007; Lee, 1993; Poynton, Carlson, Hopper, & Carey, 2006; Webb & Brigman, 2007), and comprehensive guidance programs (Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001). While many studies have focused on the students' experiences of their participation in academic remediation interventions, few studies have examined students' perception of the process of working with a school counselor.

### **Perceptions of School Counseling**

There is limited literature available on at-risk students' perceptions of school counseling, and their experience as recipients of a school counselor's academic counseling interventions. Obtaining the perspective of at-risk students can help school counselors effectively select interventions tailored to the needs of this population (Bridgeland et al., 2006). In a study on the perceptions and experiences of African American male students with their school counselors, Owens, Simmons, Bryant, and Henfield (2011) found that participants identified the following themes: the need for more academic support and study skills, assistance with managing the demands of school work, collaboration on educational planning, and learning support. In a similar study that addressed ways that school counselors can better support the needs of African American students, the participants suggested that building relationships and advocating for resources to help them succeed are the most important roles of school counselors (Williams & Portman, 2012). The ability for school counselors to demonstrate support for student's culture was also found as valuable in studies by Moore-Thomas and Lent (2007) and Kunkel (1990).

In a classic study by Theimer (1970), a group of African American urban high school students were surveyed regarding their participation in counseling sessions with their school counselors. The students identified the types of topics discussed (e.g., school work/problems, behavior, friends, relationships, career, family problems), frequency of counseling sessions, and their own feelings about school counseling (e.g., fear of meeting with the school counselor, desire for school counseling to focus on more practical/relevant issues).

Students have also provided their perceptions regarding the preferred role of school

counselors. A survey of high school students found that school counselors should serve as leaders, advocates, collaborators, counselors, coordinators, and users of data (Kuhn, 2004). It is helpful understanding what students believe school counselors should be doing, but the existing research does not necessarily address students' perceptions of their experiences participating in school counseling. West, Kayser, Overton, and Saltmarsh (1991), in a quantitative study of 125 high school seniors, identified reasons that students reported avoiding school counseling. Several of the most common reasons students did not participate in counseling were due to lack of relationship with the school counselor, fear of breach of confidentiality, lack of time, embarrassment regarding concerns, and unavailability of the school counselor. Given the findings from previous studies, this study addresses the research question, "What is the experience of at-risk male students' participating in academic focused individual school counseling sessions?"

### Method

Qualitative methodology was used to explore the subjective nature of the experience of a group of students participating in school counseling as limited existing research was available (Hunt, 2011; Maxwell, 2013). Qualitative research is important to construct a knowledge base to help school counselors understand helpful interventions (Moore-Thomas & Lent, 2007; Sink & McDonald, 2000), and to better understand participants' experiences in a particular setting or with a specific incident (Patton, 2002). Qualitative phenomenological case study methodology was deemed as the most appropriate approach to begin understanding the experiences of a group of at-risk male students participating in school counseling academic counseling sessions. Yin (2008) reported that phenomenological case study approaches are utilized to study applied practices and investigate a single phenomenon (i.e., academic counseling sessions) experienced by multiple participants (i.e., at-risk male students) within the context of a larger culture (i.e., high school students). The participants in this phenomenological case study were intentionally sampled to provide a perspective from a unique population group within a school – specifically male 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students who were at risk of dropping out of high school. Interviewing the participants at multiple points during the experience was the primary means of data collection. The data were collected through a series of two individual interviews and a third structured focus group interview with all of the participants.

Each participant attended six individual counseling sessions with a school counselor that focused on academic issues. Prior to meeting with the at-risk students, the school counselor reviewed the ASCA National Standards (2012) for academic development as a guide to focus the individual counseling session conversations. Similar to Brown's (1999) recommendations, the individual counseling sessions provided interventions that increased the academic achievement of high school students at risk of dropping out, and the school counseling sessions were intended to empower the at-risk students to achieve academically (Bemak, Chi-Ying, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005). Based on the school counse-

lor's experience regarding the needs of at-risk students at the high school, the individual academic-focused counseling sessions with each student were structured on the following topics with the goals of the session based upon the ASCA (2012) standards. The six individual academic counseling sessions were 30 minutes each and focused the discussion on career intentions, procrastination, academic goals, note taking, test taking, and time management. Table 1 provides a description of the six session topics and the goal for each individual counseling session. While the individual counseling sessions focused on specific topics, the individual conversations allowed flexibility for the school counselor to tailor the sessions to meet the specific needs of each participant. In preparation for each individual counseling session, the school counselor reviewed the goal and found resources (e.g., guidance lessons plans) to gather ideas for discussion and in-session activities related to the topic. In each session, students received strategies focused on improving their academic performance and were provided with an opportunity to discuss the factors impacting their academic performance.

TABLE 1

**Individual Academic Counseling Sessions**

<b>Session</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Goal</b>
1	Academic Connection to Career Intentions	Learn how academic achievement enhances future career opportunities
2	Avoiding Procrastination	Understand how to work independently and persistently on academic requirements
3	Developing Academic Goals	Apply knowledge of aptitude and interest in setting academic goals
4	Test Taking Tips	Learn strategies to improve performance on academic tests
5	Time Management	Understand how to balance time for academic, extracurricular, and personal responsibilities
6	Note Taking	Learn self-directed strategies to improve note taking and retention of academic content

### Participants

Participants included 11 male students who were enrolled in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade and who had experience participating in academic focused individual counseling sessions with a school counselor. The students represented a purposeful sample of the male students at the school. Inclusion criteria included identifying male freshmen and sophomore students who were characterized as "at risk" of dropping out of school due to failing at least two classes. Students were assigned to school counselors alphabetically at the high school. One of the school counselors identified participants for inclusion in the study by reviewing the list of students assigned and identifying the students who met criteria for inclusion. The participants and their parents gave their written consent. All of the

students who were invited chose to participate in the study and were assigned pseudonyms. The mean age of the participants was 14.5 years old. The participants were a culturally diverse group of at-risk male students that included: African American ( $n = 1$ ), Asian ( $n = 1$ ), Hispanic ( $n = 1$ ), and Caucasian ( $n = 8$ ) students (see Table 2 for participant profiles).

**TABLE 2**

**Profile of the Participants**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
1	Andy	9	Caucasian
2	Brandon	10	Caucasian
3	Dan	10	Asian
4	Dave	9	African-American
5	Eddie	10	Hispanic
6	Jeff	10	Caucasian
7	Joel	9	Caucasian
8	Peter	9	Caucasian
9	Scott	9	Caucasian
10	Steve	9	Caucasian
11	William	9	Caucasian

### Data Collection

Following participation in six individual academic counseling sessions, each student was invited to participate in a series of three interviews with the school counselor to gain a deeper understanding of his experience. Guided by recommendations/practices set forth by Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009), the research team determined it would be beneficial to use an “insider” (i.e., the school counselor who provided the counseling sessions) to conduct the participant interviews. The school counselor’s relationship with the participants facilitated data collection as the 9th and 10th grade male students already had a level of trust based upon familiarity.

Each of the individual interviews and the focus group interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. During the interviews, the students were asked open-ended and exploratory questions to understand each student’s perception of the academic focused individual counseling sessions. The interview questions were based upon the research question that investigated the experience of at-risk male students’ participating in academic focused individual counseling sessions with a school counselor. The researchers framed interview questions to elicit the students’ perceptions of their experiences (e.g., “What would you say to other students at risk for dropping out of school about the overall experience of meeting with a school counselor?”).

Based upon the participants’ responses in the first interview, questions that explored the initial themes were developed. The second interview involved the school

counselor reviewing with the participants their responses from the first interview and checking the emerging themes. The participants reviewed and clarified their transcriptions. This provided an additional opportunity for the students to review their transcripts from the first interview and for the researchers to investigate the emerging themes with each participant. Following the two individual 50-minute interviews, all of the participants were interviewed together in a 50-minute focus group. The focus group provided an opportunity for all of the participants to review the emerging themes, along with quotes, and to comment upon the themes of the study.

## Data Analysis

Each researcher independently conducted thematic analysis of the interview transcripts transcribed by a graduate assistant. The researchers coded the participants' responses by each emerging theme identified, and utilized a constant comparison method to identify the meaning of participants' unique and shared experiences (Patton, 2002). Researchers then compared, discussed, and grouped the themes. The researchers used coding to further refine the themes by examining similarities among the interview data and how they reflected the experience across participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

**Member checking.** The researchers used member checking to enhance trustworthiness through the data analysis process (Creswell, 2003). The researchers asked the participants, first individually and then as a group, to review their individual transcripts of interviews and emerging themes identified by the researchers. The participants agreed and provided comments that supported all of the themes.

**Description of researcher.** Researcher characteristics influence the data collection and analysis process (Patton, 2002). The first author is a counselor educator at a mid-western university and is a licensed school counselor who teaches courses within the school counseling program. The second author is a licensed school counselor with previous experience as a high school counselor. The third author is a licensed school counselor working in a high school. All of the researchers had familiarity with the ASCA (2012) national model, and the counselor educator had experience conducting qualitative research.

**Trustworthiness strategies.** The research team took several measures to establish trustworthiness and credibility in the current study. These included using multiple data sources, transcribing the interviews, checking accuracy with members, taking analytic notes, and including a peer debriefer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Multiple sources of data and researchers were utilized in the process (e.g., school counseling interns, school counselors, and counselor educators) to facilitate investigator triangulation and increase credibility of the analysis (Yin, 2008). Constant comparison coding, field notes, triangulation, and member checking were used to increase the credibility of the results. The researchers gathered data to create a thick description that revealed the participants'

experiences.

Dependability was demonstrated by maintaining an electronic record of the transcriptions and the emerging themes at different stages of the research. The researchers bracketed their assumptions throughout the study (Rennie, 1994). The researchers held the assumptions that the participants would gain knowledge that would help them academically and that the participants would express that they valued the experience. During the analysis the researchers discussed their perceptions about students' experience in school counseling, and then attempted to avoid including personal assumptions and biases when reviewing the data and identifying the emerging themes. Analytic notes and questions that arose during the process were recorded. The researchers worked to find consensus among the team to provide multiple perspectives while reducing researcher bias. During the course of the study, an additional peer debriefer with expertise in qualitative case study methodology was utilized to review the data, themes, and provide feedback to the researchers on the methodology and data analysis process. The peer debriefer examined the data and helped the reviewers consider how the participants' description of their experience was reflected in the development of themes.

### Findings

Based upon the data analysis, the researchers found themes that conceptualized the experience of 11 at-risk male students participating in school counseling academic focused counseling sessions. The researchers found that the at-risk male students experience participating in school counseling was characterized by the following four themes: (a) changed perception of counseling, (b) gained academic information, (c) increased confidence, and (d) prompted change in behaviors.

#### Theme One: Changed Perception of Counseling

Participants commented upon issues related to how their negative perception of school counseling changed into a positive perception of the process of school counseling. Brandon stated,

Back when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I used to think that the counselor that I had was this mean old lady who sits at a desk and tells me what to do. But since you've started helping me pass high school and start to pass in life, now I'm doing something constructive.

Peter shared "I always thought they [school counselors] were just for people with problems, like [students] that cut themselves or something. I didn't know they could help you with your classes and stuff." Dave remarked about his changed experience with school counselors, stating, "I never had anybody help me out like this before...It just got me at first." Another participant, William, reinforced the change of perception he experienced: "You trusted me. Most of them [school counselors] are just like, alright



well you should do this. Instead of giving me ideas, they gave me orders.” Dave highlighted the importance of experiencing a caring school counselor:

My confidence used to be real, real low and I didn't really care about my confidence. Other people would tell me [information] and I didn't care. [This time] my confidence started to really go up because I started doing better and I found out that there were people who really cared; before there were old people who didn't care.

Participants appreciated a positive and collaborative style of counseling. Brandon explained, "my [previous] counselor was always calling me down, telling me I was failing and then would say go back to class...demoralizing you, and saying 'you're stupid', well basically saying 'you're stupid', but in a nice way.”

Participants voiced their preference for frequent school counseling sessions and weekly appointments with the school counselor. Scott stated, “I wouldn't have realized so much about what I need to do, if we only met once. The more I kept doing this, the more I thought about it. I realized that I need to work more in school.” Similarly, Brandon said “you guys kept on calling me down, taking time to actually talk to me and the other people. It [regular meetings] kind of changed me a lot, because other teachers just say it once, probably once a semester.” Brandon continued with his thought comparing the frequency of repetition in the education process to school counseling stating,

[The] same reason why teachers have reviews, to keep the stuff fresh in our minds, review is the most important and that's what you guys did. You keep bringing me down here, talking about stuff that was the most important. Then I would come down the next week and you like go through the stuff we went through last week. And then, interpret on what we were doing this week.

### **Theme Two: Gained Academic Information**

Participants remarked that school counseling helped them learn practical information and skills that helped them with their academic performance. Scott commented, “I learned which subjects I need most help in and how to study better in some of the meetings;” and, similarly, Dan stated “the tips for study skills helped me be more goal oriented and helped me set more sub-goals and keep trying.” Jeff shared the importance of learning practical study skills, stating, “they gave you the right ways to study and the helpful tips to do on the tests. They like gave you all the things to prepare for the test.” Andy highlighted the understanding of the importance of academic achievement:

You guys helped me think about what I am going to be doing after high school and it helped me finalize my plans after high

school. I hadn't really finalized or worked that out yet. I was going to try to figure out how I was going to do it. I just wasn't doing it yet...and now that I have gone through this with you guys; now I know how I want to do that.

Brandon commented upon the realization that he has to depend upon himself to achieve academically:

Another bad thing is when your teachers go and ask your parents to help you [improve your academic work]. My parents don't even remember what they did a couple weeks ago. How are they supposed to remember what they did years ago? I remember when I brought math home. My parents were like "what is this?" and I was like "that's third grade math," and they are like "I didn't start doing this until high school" and I'm like "well this is what I am doing now". Then they are like "I don't remember how to do this."

The participants commented upon how participating in school counseling reinforced and gave importance to academic information that parents and teachers have been telling them. Brandon stated,

I tend to listen to other people better than my parents. Only because from the parents I hear it over and over again and they have been saying it for years. I basically turn my cheek...Then all these other people get involved and start telling me the same thing and I start to think, maybe they might have been right.

Similarly, another participant remarked about the tendency to ignore information from parents until it was reinforced by the school counselor. Dave shared,

I heard it all the time...from my mom going on and on and on. It took this year to get it through to me, with other people saying it to me. 'Cause if it comes from a member of your family, it takes a while to get that through your head.

### **Theme Three: Increased Confidence**

Participants commented that some teachers and parents discouraged their academic success and how school counseling has increased the positive way they view themselves and their self-confidence. Brandon stated,

I realize I had more potential than I thought I did. Because I just

basically chilled most of my school life and now I am starting to participate more in everything, starting to understand things a little bit more clearly.

Dave remarked,

I put more effort into it [school]. Before I didn't really care much. I really would let that stuff go in one ear and out the other and I didn't really pay much attention. And I really see a big difference now.

Similar participants made the connection between small successes and improved self-esteem. Jeff shared,

I think it is kind of like you start to feel a little bit better about yourself and a little bit more confident and it is easier to do better when you are more confident. You think about all the things that you have learned and it makes you think I could of [done] this or I could get my work done and just do it.

Dave stated,

I learned that I really can do this. Stuff came easier, like it wasn't that hard for me. [Previously] I didn't make an effort and I made it harder on myself and I couldn't do it. I made it harder on myself then than I do now. Stuff is hard but I put effort into it and it becomes easier and easier.

William also verbalized his desire to improve his academic achievement:

You have to realize what you are going to do with your life. Because if you don't get good grades ... if you don't understand certain kind of math, polynomials, algebra, and stuff like that, you can't be a scientist. You can't even get a job at McDonalds sometimes, if you don't pass 10<sup>th</sup> grade. So what are you supposed to do?

Finally, Eddie commented on lack of past encouragement and how receiving encouragement from the school counselor motivated them to change:

Last year, everybody used to tell me I was doing bad. It was just like, "whatever, I don't care." But, like, when people start saying you are doing good, you're not used to that. It makes you feel good. You can actually do something.

#### **Theme Four: Prompted Change in Behaviors**

Participants reported that they had engaged in more academically appropriate behaviors both in and outside of school as a result of meeting with the school counselor. Participants were aware of positive changes in their classroom behavior. Dave said, “I pay attention more. I keep [my] focus on the teacher more, I heard what he says. My old teacher used to go in one ear and out the other. [Now] I pay attention more and do the group things” and Scott stated “I have just paid attention more in school and stayed awake in class” while William reported “before I wanted to talk in class. Now I am one of those kids, when someone is talking in class, I’m like ‘shut up’.” Students also reported changes outside of school. Joel reported, “I’m starting to do my homework a lot more and remember to turn in my papers.” Similarly, Steve stated, “I am doing a little bit better in school and now when I’m out of school, I actually do my homework and stuff.” Andy remarked about how learning to make changes in his diet has improved his academic performance:

I started eating breakfast in the morning, or trying to. One of the reasons that I do bad in school is because I am tired in the morning and the first couple classes, especially in my math class, I am exhausted. I almost want to take a nap... you know it [breakfast] helps stimulate the brain and then when I get to school it helps you think more.

Several participants reflected upon the examples of their fathers as motivators to change their behaviors. Joel stated, “I know my dad just tells me this [achieve academically] because he doesn’t want me to end up like him. He works at a steel mill. I don’t want to end up working 12 hours a day.” Brandon shared a story about his struggle to achieve academically without support from his father and his belief that he must take action:

I have to motivate myself or I’m going to end up like my dad. He’s a truck driver and he’s gone for months at a time. I don’t want to do that, sit on my butt and get fat all day. I swear, I don’t want to say I am ashamed of my dad, but I am ashamed of his choices.

#### **Discussion**

The four themes of the participants in academic-focused counseling sessions included changed perception of counseling, gained academic information, increased confidence, and prompted change in behaviors. Based on findings from this present study, the at-risk students’ experiences were consistent with previous research, while also adding to the new perspectives to the research on school counselor’s working with at-risk students. The students reported that their current participation in school counseling was different than their previous experiences with school counselors. Examples of school counselors

in numerous 21<sup>st</sup> century television shows (e.g., *Glee*, *Miss Guided*) and films (e.g., *Easy A*, *Orange County*) have presented high school counselors as incompetent and unhelpful. These popularized versions of school counselors might shape the perception high school students regarding their interactions with the school counselor at their school. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation conducted a national study of 600 high school graduates. In general, the participants surveyed characterized their interactions with their school counselor as “anonymous and unhelpful” and the advice as “impersonal and perfunctory” (pg. 5, Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & DuPont, 2010). Students who have a positive experience with a competent school counselor might engage in the process and improve in their academic development (Sink, Akos, Turnbull, & Myududu, 2008). Wilson (1986) found that mandatory interventions for at-risk students might be less successful if the students did not voluntarily want to work with the school counselor. High school counselors should actively communicate that they want to help students with academic issues. As evidenced by this study, school counselors can change those perceptions.

Participants in this study appreciated the opportunity to have a discussion about what they believe will help them improve their academic performance. Participants valued frequency and accountability of individual sessions with the school counselor. Creange (1971) and Reeves (2006) emphasized the importance of regular and consistent meetings scheduled with students who are at risk of dropping out of school. When school counselors meet frequently with students, this communicates to the students that their issues are significant. Weekly meetings created a process of developing and reinforcing new attitudes and values towards academic performance, rather than a one-time conversation. Developing and monitoring progress on the goal of academic improvement reminds students to prioritize that area.

Lee and Smith (1999) found that parents, peers, and teachers contributed to students' school achievement. Similarly, the participants in this study reported that school counselors reinforced constructive information regarding academic achievement that they heard or observed from their parents and teachers. School counselors can reinforce such messages (e.g., importance of studying, necessity to earn passing grades) from parents through the use of counseling skills and interventions that are grounded in school counseling research for academic improvement in order to connect with the perceptions of the students. The emergence of the theme that students learned academic knowledge reinforced the perspective that it is beneficial for school counselors to provide academic interventions such as: counseling students on basic study skills, providing test taking tips, teaching students how to set academic goals, and helping students understand how current academic performance can lead to future career life success or failure. In this study, students reported that they learned academic skills that contributed to increased academic performance. Helping students learn academic skills and then experience successes contributed to a change in belief about their ability to succeed. Students began to realize that if they make specific positive behavioral changes, then they are not “stupid” and destined to fail. Dimmit (2003) reported that students believed some of the reasons they were failing courses were due to being unmotivated

and lacking self-esteem. School counselors can provide counseling interventions to address these issues, for example by helping students see the relevance of curriculum, increasing motivation, and helping parents to become more involved.

As a result of participating in school counseling, the participants changed certain academic behaviors. Participants experienced a change from not caring about school to reporting that they wanted to learn. The behavioral change from the participant did not result from the school counselor saying “you need to change your attitude,” but rather the positive relationship with the school counselor. Participants began to make the connection that accomplishments do not just happen, but that there are behavioral steps to reach the goals (e.g., participating in class, studying at home, not sleeping in class, eating breakfast). At-risk students can change their attitudes, behaviors, and performance and ultimately succeed when provided with appropriate school counselor interventions.

### **Implications for School Counselors**

Findings from this study have several implications for school counselors. First, it is important that school counselors proactively identify high school students at their school who are failing courses. Early intervention in high school increases the likelihood of helping students stay enrolled in school. While some school counselors may prefer to work with high achieving students, there is a need for school counselors to increase the amount of time identifying and serving at-risk male student. The necessity for school counselors to identify at-risk students is evidenced by continued high dropout rates and the failure of school systems to correct this problem.

Second, the opportunity for school counselors to address the needs of at-risk male students begins with their ability to develop a counseling relationship. West et al. (1991) noted that high school students avoid meeting with the school counselor if they do not have a strong relationship with her or him. School counselors must find ways to build relationships with students likely to drop out of school (Kunkel, 1990; Williams & Portman, 2012). Structured and frequent individual meetings are helpful to build a relationship with at-risk students. The meetings reinforce the academic concepts (Reeves, 2006) and facilitate the therapeutic relationship between the student and the school counselor. Consistent with Azzam (2007), a meaningful relationship with school personnel (i.e., school counselor) increased at-risk students’ confidence that they could succeed in school. For that reason, school counselors should look for ways to identify and build relationships with students who are failing courses.

Third, encouragement is an important intervention delivered by school counselors within the context of the counseling relationship. Many students who dropped out reported that they were unmotivated (Bridgeland et al., 2006), thus school counselors should look for opportunities to encourage students who are disengaged. Providing academic counseling interventions to students who have multiple failures is one way to motivate students and might decrease likelihood of dropping out of high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Furthermore, individual academic counseling interven-

tions are effective in improving a student's academic development (Cook & Kaffenberger, 2003). Rather than providing a general encouragement to at-risk students about how they should be "working harder" or scolding them for doing poorly, school counselors should structure their academic counseling sessions in the context of a supportive relationship and focus on goals consistent with the ASCA (2012) national standards for academic development.

Lastly, when selecting topics to address during academic focused individual counseling sessions, school counselors should focus on study skills, time management, and learning support strategies (Owens et al., 2011). High school students may be unaware that the school counselor can assist them with academic issues. School counselors should promote their role within the school, in order for students to understand the academic services they can provide (ASCA, 2012). Based on the finding of this study, the participants reported their perception of school counseling changed to be more positive after working with the school counselor across six sessions. School counselors should remember that they could adjust the perception of students to be more positive towards counseling by building a strong counseling relationship characterized by respect for their culture and facilitating a conversation about what the student wants the change and then how school counseling can help the student achieve their goals. When student's change their perception and view school counseling as helpful, then new opportunities are available for school counselors to provide interventions that prompt positive behavioral changes. Similarly, when students experience early positive results, that success can provide encouragement for the student to have increased confidence and make further changes in their academic behaviors. School counselors create opportunities for student success, which helps students recognize that they have the capabilities to improve their performance. School counselors can prompt insight within students to consider different behaviors in order to improve their academic performance.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Utilizing a phenomenological case study approach (e.g., one group, location) prevented the results from being generalized to the larger population of at-risk male students. Although this approach does not provide the opportunity to generalize across student populations, it does initiate a discussion regarding the unique experiences of at-risk male students participating in school counseling. As the participants were male students struggling in school, this might have limited the breadth and depth of the verbal responses to the interview questions for the qualitative study. Future research could conduct a similar study with at-risk high school students who identify with other genders to examine the themes that emerge regarding their perception of participating in individual academic focused school counseling sessions. Researchers could broaden the scope of the study and interview K-12 students to better understand their perception of the experience of meeting with a school counselor to discuss academic difficulties. A quantitative study duplicating the interventions on a larger scale could provide general-

izable results regarding students' experiences. Finally, future studies could be expanded to examine how students perceive their experience talking with a school counselor about career or personal/social issues.

### Conclusion

School counselors are confronted with the responsibility of working with at-risk students and the challenge of finding meaningful ways to help them through school counseling interventions. The findings demonstrate that at-risk students can benefit by frequent and structured interventions with the school counselor. When others (e.g., administrators, teachers, parents) portray the notion that an at-risk student will never change, school counselors must be the ones to communicate that *all* students can succeed. School counselors' ability to help students with the most problematic behavior changes demonstrates the value of our profession. Unfortunately, school counselors who depend upon their own experiences regarding what the process is like for current at-risk male high school students likely misinterpret what is valued about the school counseling interventions. Understanding the shared perspectives of at-risk students can help school counselors understand ways to tailor the delivery and effectiveness of their interventions with at-risk male students. The themes of this study—changed perception of counseling, gained academic information, increased confidence, and prompted change in behaviors—contribute to the research base for school counseling, create a narrative of what at-risk male students value about school counselors, and increases school counselors understanding of the perspectives of at-risk male students who participate in school counseling.



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